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Re-creation of

Mary Smith

McNeill

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The Re-Creation
OF
Mary Smith

By
Ben Dixon MacNeill

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FOREWORD

This story appeared in the *News and Observer*, of whose staff the author is a member, November 28, 1920. Thousands of readers recognized in it a literary touch of high order and wondered if there is not developing in the State another MacNeill genius whose accomplishment in prose might some day be expected to parallel that of the other MacNeill in verse.

This is the story of the real Mary Smiths that we are turning out and what may be expected to happen to them at Samarcand Manor. The liberty of reproducing it in pamphlet form is taken because it is due the people of the State to let as many of them as possible know what measures they have taken to correct the tragedies of the Mary Smiths which we are producing, and help them to decide what they are willing to do to carry on the work.

R. F. BEASLEY,
State Commissioner of Public Welfare.

The Re-Creation of Mary Smith

BY BEN DIXON MACNEILL.

"It is the judgment of this court that the defendant Mary Smith be sentenced to Samarcand for an indefinite period." So spoke the judge. Before him stood a shrinking, broken, young-old woman, staring hard at the floor. Behind her, crowding the courtroom to the doors, most of the men of a virtuous community gathered to witness the spectacle of a "fallen woman" gibbeted in the courts upon a charge of gross immorality.

The prosecution had averred that the woman had been guilty of gross immoralities, that she had publicly solicited the attentions of men, that she had wandered the streets at night seeking her prey, that she was a menace to society and ought to be sentenced to prison. There was no defense. For herself the woman said nothing. To the questioning of the judge she answered that she was 16 years old. No defense save her years. She hung her head so the brim of her cheap headgear hid her face.

The men of a virtuous community looked on vaguely. Since the men of the race quit stoning their women who strayed off the narrow road of virtue appointed them, and wrote laws whereby they should be punished, the summoning of a woman publicly to answer that law has called the morbid curiosity born of repression. Here was a spectacle. Here was an open discussion of a thing that the race had decreed must not be openly talked about.

They wondered vaguely how she came to be there. They looked furtively at one another when the prosecuting attorney loosed invective upon the shrinking, shamed creature huddled alone before the bar. They wondered what

Samarcand might be and what it could do for so abandoned a creature as the attorney was picturing. Clearly a place where the creature would be bound with chains to restrain her lust. And what would become of her when the "indefinite sentence" was done?

An officer tapped the woman on the shoulder. "Come along," he said briefly, and the woman was led out. The court turned to other and lesser menaces. It had performed its duty. No more would this outcast wander the highroads to hell seeking to drag youth along to hell with her. She was gone, gone to Samarcand. The burden of her degeneracy was shifted away to other shoulders. The virtuous community thought no more of Mary Smith, the "fallen woman."

It is a long way to Samarcand from anywhere one starts. It is on the western rim of that region known as the Sandhills, three miles back from the railroad and the station that is named after a town in India where the father of Signor Pompelli was once befriended. Signor Pompelli is an Italian who has built him an estate in the western edge of Moore County, and modeled it after the land of his nativity. He has vast orchards of peaches.

Three miles west of the railroad that plies between Aberdeen and Ashboro there was once a select school for boys owned by a noted ascetic, Dr. Hanford Henderson. He built for a hundred boys, fashioning his houses after the style of the Swiss. They fit admirably into their alien landscape. The war disrupted the Doctor's school, and his health deserted him. He sold the State the Manor, and it came to be Samarcand. Officially the name of the institution is the State Home and Industrial School for Girls and Women. By universal acceptance, it is called Samarcand instead.

To this pleasant place came Mary Smith, marked with the stigma of criminal conviction, with the bitterness of a scorned woman in her heart. The world had cursed her with the bitterest curse that may sear a woman's soul.

She was filled with hate against decent people. This place, Samarcand, would add only to her bitterness. Almost death would be preferable to "indefinite sentence" in this place. Better back to the gruesome life of the streets than here!

A pleasant faced woman greeted her with matter-of-fact kindness when the officer who brought her there bundled her out. There was none of superiority, of patronizing virtue addressing outcast depravity in the woman's manner. She spoke quietly, much as if she had known Mary Smith for all her 16 years in the world and had never heard that she was other than the sort of girl she ought to be. The officer proffered a few papers and the woman took them. He looked accusingly at the girl and turned away home, glad to see the last of her.

The place looked anything but like a jail. The Manor was a large, pleasant building, with airy, comfortable rooms. There were no bars on the windows, no armed guards pacing back and forth. Now since Mary Smith was raked in off the streets weeks back she was without an officer within forbidding reach of her. The kindly woman asked her to sit down for a little while. Presently a girl in blue denim "bloomers" came in and the woman asked her to take Mary Smith down to the infirmary for a bath and some new clothes.

She went. She felt better after she had washed away the stain of the jail back at home and the grime of travel. A nurse spoke pleasantly to her. After she had bathed, the nurse examined her closely, careful for any trace of any disease. Fortunately for Mary Smith she had not suffered contamination. Others before her had been less fortunate and others since. It is their lot to be segregated until they are pronounced clean.

The infirmary was a pretty brown-shingled little building. There were clean white wards, there was an operating room, a little kitchen. Girls in blue denim were apparently in charge of the place with the nurse supervising them

but in nowise bossing them. . . . On the sleeping porch there were four little babies. Their mothers worked nearby and attended them when they needed it. They seemed very young, most of these mothers. One of them seemed scarce 15 years old.

After a while there was supper in the big dining room with more than 150 girls and young women crowding happily. A girl waited on each table, while an older girl served from the head of the table. She did it with careful attention to the details of polite usages in eating. It was new to Mary Smith, and she felt a keen embarrassment in her ignorance. The girls were gay. They talked of work.

One girl proclaimed the excellence of one Evangeline. This Evangeline, it seemed, was a cow, an aristocratic bovine under the personal supervision of the girl. A girl at another table decried Evangeline, insisting that one Millicent was a far superior cow, albeit her horns were not as long as those worn by Evangeline. There was talk of corkscrew divers, of how many gallons of blackberry jam had been made that day, of a game of volleyball after supper. Mary Smith almost forgot the aching disgrace of being an out-cast.

The girls trooped out after supper and Mary Smith was left alone in the big dining room. True, she had been asked to go to the lake, but she did not know how to accept kindness. Anyhow there was that little woman who had met her at the door sitting over by a window. Mary Smith felt like she would like to talk to that woman. Maybe she would understand that she had not intended to be bad.

Mary Smith will never know how she came to be sitting beside the little woman on the window seat looking out over the low sandhills toward sunset. She will never understand how she came to be telling her the things that she could never tell a court, or a lawyer. The little woman listened kindly, understandingly, with here and there a word when Mary Smith

faltered, unknowing whether to go on, or to run away and hide forever.

Mary Smith's life had its beginnings in a cotton mill. Her father never worked steadily, he was bad to his wife, his children worked for the family's living. There was no schooling, but she could read a little, and write her name. That was all. The mother had died. The father's brutality increased. That was a year ago. At night there was no staying at home. For clothes there was no money—the father required it all. He needed liquor. She took to going out, and her father abused her for it. She went more and was afraid to go home.

There were other girls who went out at night. They fell in with boys, older than they were, of course. They went to moving pictures. Sometimes they hugged her and sometimes they forced their kisses upon her. She was afraid at first, but it was the only way that the favor of a man could be won. They asked more, and it was given. Finally, the overt step that takes a woman across the thin line between what is called right and what is called wrong. She hadn't wanted to do it, but somehow she couldn't help it.

Life at home was intolerable. Sometimes she stayed out all night and went to work in the morning. Sometimes she did not go to work, and went home while her father was away, and slept. She had to make money enough somehow to make good her weekly earnings. She sold herself to get the money. She was not paid much. Finally they got her and sent her to Samarcand.

The little woman said nothing at all. She uttered no platitudes. She quoted no scriptures, she did not tell the girl she had done wrong. She listened and let the girl pour out her story. She let her cry until she was ready for bed. She patted Mary Smith's shoulder as she said goodnight to her. When she was gone to the big room where a dozen cots were waiting for a dozen girls, none of the women questioned her. None of them mentioned the fact that they themselves had

come there under like shadows. They were too happily tired for talk.

Two girls on nearby cots talked of an election that would be held on the following Saturday. Strange to say, the election was to be held right there, and a certain girl over in the next room was a candidate for some office. So also was another girl in another part of the house. The first mentioned, it seemed, was sure of election. So and so had promised to support her, and had got all the girls in her room to promise their votes.

There was mention of the Student Council, a thing, it seemed, that sort of run the place, needing only the final approval of the little fair-haired woman, which was rarely withheld. Had she not that day approved the sentence of the Council when it decreed that one Lizzie Somebody should not go near the lake for a week? Lizzie had uttered "damn" under some provocation or other.

Morning came, breakfast, and the girls and women separated into groups, a teacher with each group. Before breakfast ten of them had gone down and milked Evangeline and Millicent and the other aristocrats of the barn. Another had administered to Jake and Jane, the mules. Two others had served breakfast to the Countess of Samarcand, the Lord of the Manor, and their well bred children over in a neighboring pen. These were the swine. Others had fed some 200 chickens, and one girl had seen that a score of young turkeys had been properly looked after.

There was wood to be brought in. There was the week's laundry to be done. The Manor had to be put to rights, the Chalet, a comely little house where 32 girls live by themselves. There was the 75-acre farm to be looked after. But first there was a half hour of "setting up" and then prayer service in the chapel. Mary Smith stood by, having no part with these happy activities while they got under way.

"You may go down to the lake with the laundry girls today," the fair-haired lady told her. She went gladly. Never had she enjoyed anything so much as she did the honest work

of scrubbing clothes in tin tubs by the twinkling little lake set under a hill below the Chalet. Afterwards the athletic teacher came down, and they all went swimming. Some of the girls beat those divers she had seen in diving girl comedies at the moving pictures back home.

Thus began the re-creation of Mary Smith. In the afternoon she went to school. She studied in books, she learned to cook. She learned to play. She learned all the intricacies of running canning machinery. She learned to work. She grew strong. Her face lost that sickly blight that comes to the face of the "fallen woman," and took on the ruddy, sunburned glow of perfect health. She forgot the urge of sex as if it had dropped out of her consciousness. It didn't fit into the spirit of the landscape at all.

In time she learned that the girls around her had been as bad, and worse, than she had been. Some of them were mothers of one or more children. Some of them had come to Samarcand foully diseased. Some of them had had children after they came there. But these things were never talked. Sometimes they wanted to talk to the fair-haired woman about it, and she let them talk about it. They asked her advice about things and she gave it to them. The past dropped away like a nightmare that goes with waking. It was too unreal, and too far away to mean anything. It might not have happened at all.

One Saturday late in the summer the word was passed that they were going on a hike that afternoon, taking along their blankets, and camping out. They wandered far, scattering as they willed over the countryside. Mary Smith got separated from the crowd. How she didn't quite know. She had stopped beside a road to climb up a little tree after a cluster of wild grapes that she saw where the vine grew thick on the top of the tree. The others had gone on.

The noise of an automobile drawing to a standstill under the tree surprised her. There were four men in it. They looked very much

like the men that Mary Smith knew away back yonder when she was some one else. All four of them spoke to her at once, and as if they had known her for a long time. Their crude familiarity awoke more memories.

"You're one of those Samarcand girls," said one of them. "Come along with us and we'll show you a good time. Aw, come on, be a sport." Mary Smith almost fell out of the tree. Her face flamed with humiliation. Taking her wordless embarrassment for an unspoken desire to accept their invitation, the four—"fallen men" the fair-haired woman calls them—renewed their importunings.

"You—you—" Mary Smith had come down out of the tree by this time. Her eyes blazed now and her face was dead white. A moment she faced them, groping for decent words with which to scorn this offal that was offering her insult. She couldn't find them and to her lips rose once familiar invective, but she stopped short. On the impulse she turned and fled through the woods, never slacking her flight until she had overtaken the hikers.

That night by the camp fire she told the fair haired woman about it. The story came brokenly, between sobs. The other girls heard about it, and after awhile one of them spoke for them all. The thing had happened before, and their judgment was not impulse, but the sober determination of women who had found themselves.

"Miss McNaughton, if we could just catch one of 'em and if you'd just let us have him, he'd never come back here again. He would never go anywhere again."

Thus the "fallen woman," the problem that has vexed man since he devised the moral code, thus the menace to society who was dragging men to hell had come up from the mire into which unhappy chance had trampled her. Mary Smith was a woman. Now she might go back to the judge who adjudged her a prostitute and look him in the face unafraid. She had been reclaimed.

And that is Samarcand. The little Scottish woman, Miss Agnes McNaughton, has done

what two hundred generations of men have failed to do—she has solved the problem of the “fallen woman.” It is too early yet to tell how far reaching her work is going to be. It is a bare two years old. But none can look upon the achievement of two years at Samarcand and question the wisdom of the Governor who urged it, the General Assembly which authorized the initial expenditure, nor the decision of the Commissioner of Public Welfare whose energy brought it into actual being.

There are 173 women, four babies, and nine teachers there today. There is not a man on the place, there are no guards, no barred windows, no restricting fences. That little woman from the Highlands of Scotland takes these women there upon whom society has stamped the red seal, gives them a chance to make good, and generally they do it. In the two years since she opened the place she has entered 203 women and girls. Twenty-nine have been discharged, and the other one ran away some weeks back and they haven’t found her.

Not all the women who go to Samarcand go there with the record of the woman we have taken as typical. Some have fallen lower. Many of them are young girls who have never crossed the line that marks a prostitute. Little girls who had not a chance at home to do anything but what Mary Smith did. Miss McNaughton has found them in time to save them from the gutter. These she keeps nearest her, not trusting too much to the leaven that it at work in the institution.

There are women at Samarcand as old as 29 and there is a little girl there not yet twelve. The woman of 29 had children and no husband. One of her children was born at the institution. She has learned to read and write there, to cook and sew and do all the things that have been delegated to the female of the species for doing. In time she may go back to the world to earn an honest living for herself and her children.

There is the case of a little girl whose real name is Mary. Mary is a little past twelve. She was taken in the street, and when the

policeman took her she cursed things around any blasphemer that he had ever seen. Her father and mother fought all the time at home, and Mary roamed the streets. She was a female gamin. There was nothing to do but send her to Samarcand. The night she got there she addressed such a tirade of analytical blasphemy as to shock the most hardened woman among them.

This little gamin has been there now for half a year. Some days ago Mary, in a moment of agitation, let out a simple "damn." Nobody seemed to hear her, but that night after the house was dark the little Scotch woman heard a knock at her room door. Mary crept in, threw herself on the bed with her and cried brokenly in her grief over the lapse. She went to sleep with her head on the older woman's breast.

Then there is the girl from High Point. Her story duplicates the story of Mary Smith—which is the approximate story of reality with an occasional incident borrowed from somebody else to make for continuity—only the judge didn't find her actually guilty. Two companions were found guilty and the judge knew a little of Samarcand. He was telling them about the chance they would have to come up from the stigma of prostitution. The girl overheard him.

"Judge, can I go there—I haint had no breakfast and I won't have no dinner nor no supper until it gets dark and I can go out and find me a man—" The amazed judge sent her along, and now she is one of the best cooks in all Samarcand. She is happy in the freedom from the driving necessity of living when she has nothing to give in return for her keep but the instinct of race continuity that nature planted in her.

Dr. Henderson built for a hundred. Miss McNaughton has 173 besides her teachers. There are 90 women and girls, some of them in jails, waiting for a chance to go to Samarcand. Some of them have prostituted themselves, and others are mere girls who have not yet gone that far. Not another one can

be crowded into the place as it is, and it has come down to the question of money where all such questions eventually come. Miss McNaughton wants more equipment.

But little has been spent for improvements here. Dr. Henderson built well when he built, but time has taken toll. His water and sewer plant has broken down under the strain of double service, and the girls bring the water that they use several hundred yards from a spring. There is no fire protection now save a well organized bucket brigade. There is very little fire risk, but at that, there is always that danger.

The dress of these women is simple, but the laundry of 185 people, however simple are their individual sartorial effects, is an undertaking of considerable moment. These girls wash beside the lake, using their sturdy arms and old-fashioned washboards. The clothes are spread out on the grass to dry. They need a laundry. They need waterworks, and they need a new electrical plant. The one they have is sadly overloaded. The next General Assembly cannot well deny these women the chance that they have never had.

"What would it cost the State to pass these women through the courts one time each year, and keep them in jail for half the time," we asked Miss McNaughton. "What would it cost for the scattering disease with an inevitable percentage of these women carrying diseases?"

"It would cost many times what we are spending here. It would cost more than our budget calls for next year. That is the mere money cost, which is the cheapest thing about it," she made answer.

The germ of Samarcand was born in Laurinburg. Years back Rev. Dr. A. A. McGeachy, a Presbyterian minister, now living in Charlotte, but having his beginnings in Scotland county in the church where Col. Murdock MacKinnon and Rev. John H. Coble were the ruling spirits, began to speak of a home for these women upon whom the world turned its back. It took years, but finally it came with the General Assembly of 1917.

It was a year before the Commissioner of Public Safety, Roland F. Beasley, found opportunity to put the machinery into operation. As it so often happens when people want anything done, Beasley turned to the Pages of the Sandhills. J. R. Page, least known of the five distinguished brothers, found the Manor for him and it was bought for \$22,500.

The people of that community didn't want any home for women in their midst and they protested. They were uneasy until Miss McNaughton came among them. Now not a man and not a woman in that whole country but would fight for the little Scotch woman. The other day when we were there for a few hours two of the neighbors came by to see if there was anything that they might be able to do. They are self-appointed guardians over the unfortunate.

There is no guard about the place. None is needed to keep the girls there. One might be needed to keep "fallen men" away from the place, but for the informal policing of these good neighbors. A strange automobile cannot pass through that community day or night, but somebody will observe it. The first thought is to telephone Miss McNaughton and tell her to be on the watch.

Once or twice they have broken through, but they didn't know until afterward that the little woman was born in the Highlands.

Governor Bickett has exercised admirable judgment in selecting the Board of Trustees. He has had the advice of Mr. Beasley, to be sure, but the Governor has a unique record for selecting appointees, anyway. Chairman of the Board is Dr. McGeachy. With him are Dr. Delia Dixon Carroll, of Raleigh; Mrs. W. N. Everette, Rockingham; Mrs. J. R. Page, Aberdeen; W. S. Blakeney, Monroe.

They have made Samarcand mean HOME to 173 women. There was a tragedy in one of the larger cities of the State a year ago. A man with a 12-year-old boy took to live with him a woman with a 12-year old girl. Court proceedings took the woman from him and forbade marriage as well. To circumvent the

court, the man and the woman plotted marriage between himself and the little 12-year old girl. Again the court took action. The man went to prison, the woman to the workhouse, the boy to Stonewall Jackson training school and the 12-year old bride to Samarcand. The court went further and set about annulment of the marriage. The girl was brought back for a witness. After a week she called the judge on the telephone.

"Judge, I want to go home," she told him.

"Home!" exclaimed the judge. "You are at home now. I am not going to let you go back to Samarcand. I'll find you a nice place to stay."

"You'll not either," she fairly shouted at him. "I'm going back to Samarcand if I have to walk." She went.

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